

Introduction: Good, Better, Best

IN HIS BOOK *Better*, surgeon Atul Gawande asks what it takes to improve performance. True stories from the world of medicine illustrate the hard-driving diligence, amazing ingenuity, and ethical integrity that underlie best practices and life-saving innovations. His take-home lessons apply as well to musicians, athletes, and saints-in-the-making as to doctors, nurses, and medical administrators.

Improvement is possible. It will not happen without desire, conscious intention, and hard work. Many people will be “low performers,” fewer still “awful,” most in a murky area I’ll call “good.” To be “better” requires something saints have always known: self-awareness with a willingness to evaluate one’s own performance. In *Souls at Work* I offer you assistance in the formation of your own interior vessel, in moving from “good” toward “better.”

Doctor Gawande’s experience reveals an interesting relationship between the breakaway, top-performing hospitals and doctors, and the improvement of the many more well-intentioned, well-trained, trying-hard players under the “good” hump of the performance bell curve. The superstars’ success is *needed* to spur improvement for everyone in the system. If the bar is not set as high as someone so far has managed to reach, everyone suffers from diminution of expectations, and overall performance drops to lower and lower levels.

Far from intimidating, or shaming, their fellows, the surgeons with great track records, the hospitals that cut superbug infection rates to seemingly impossible lows, the cystic fibrosis treatment center whose patients have double the average life expectancy inspire significant improvements everywhere in the field. Performance improves when someone says “best” is possible. *Souls at Work* is about that movement from good to better to best; from child/beginner to youth/struggler to adult/master; from one- to two- to three-dimensional freedom.

Souls at Work

The spiritual life, unlike the mile run, or the masterworks of Bach, cannot be approached as a skill set or as a mountain to conquer. Because it is woven of your own *being*, practiced in and through your own unique life tasks, pursued for goods no metric can measure, it is difficult to speak of spiritual “improvement” as we speak of performance improvement in other physical and temporal endeavors. What I believe can be improved—with spiritual direction, with conscious attention and effort, with a creative approach—is your capacity for the fullest possible realization of your own humanity, and thus of the space for Christ-within-you.

Growth in the soul’s capacity for Christ is increased by sorrow, pain, longing, unrequited love, powerlessness. But these are not means for us to use upon ourselves. There are other means, though, by which you can participate in the opening and deepening of your capacity for Christ. To interest yourself in—literally, to enter *into the essence of*—wonders of Creation, the dynamics of your own struggles, forms others have created to embody their responses to the essential questions you face as you grow: these are means I hope to help you practice using more consciously. You can look *at* things in curiosity when they attract your attention. More, though, you can look *through* things studiously and be transformed by deliberately *placing your interest in* what they have to teach you of God and His ways, of Christ and His way in you.

The saints set the bar for virtue and holiness. They are the “positive shape” we want to emulate and re-present in our own lives. In *Souls at Work* you have a fellow “saint wannabe” coaching your life-crafting and opening a conversation about what it means to grow up, to become free, to be realized, and to practice being you. I’ve created a workbook that won’t really be complete until *you* write it in *your* life. You might wonder, “Where are the ‘spiritual’ things? Isn’t it enough to study theology and the lives of the saints, compare ourselves to Christ, receive the sacraments, avoid sin, and pine for heaven?”

Souls at Work, in its way, goes *beyond* those excellent practices, but in the opposite direction. “Beyond” is not only “toward heaven” but also “toward the rootedness of things in deep, earthy reality.” Your humanity—mind, emotions, body, will, senses, desires, needs, and actions—is the natural form upon which the supernatural life of

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Christ takes shape. The three steps—be present to reality, engage the tensions that reality presents, and enter new forms with responsive attentiveness—could be practiced in any area of work or study. The focus here is upon realities, tensions, and forms from the book written in *my* life. I hope that my set of practice exercises will help you learn to find your own “material” everywhere you look, and to share that with others on this journey toward greater interior freedom.